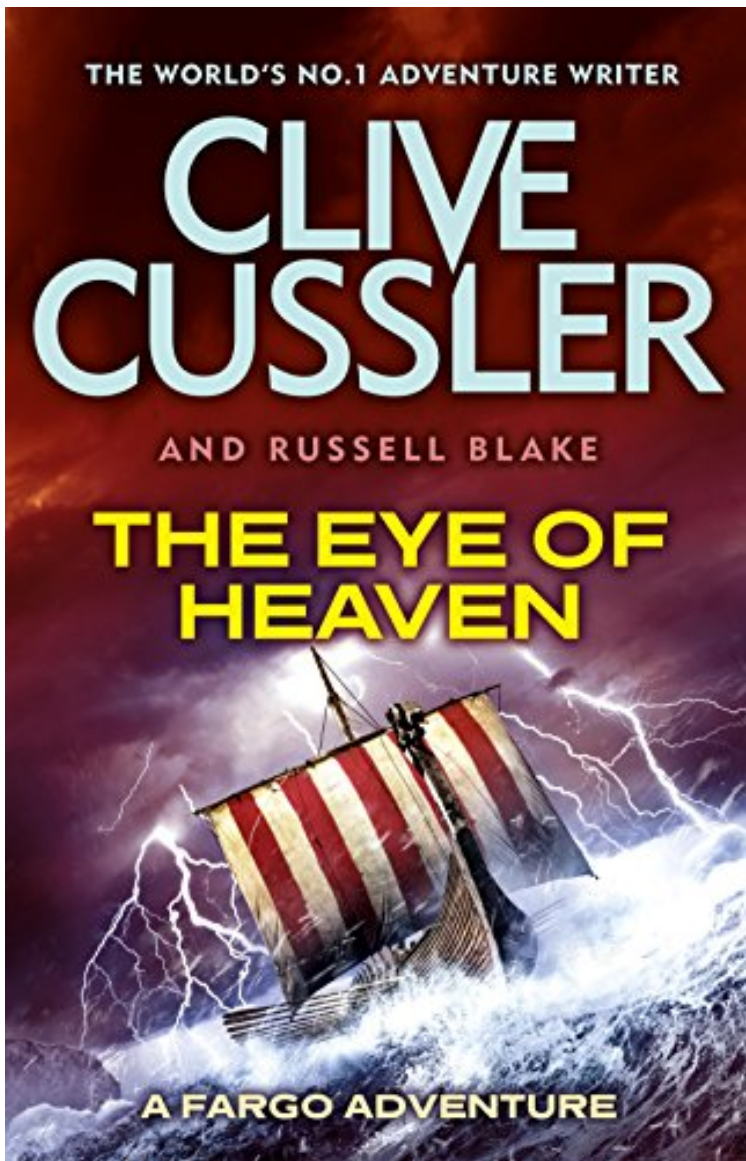


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The Eye of Heaven: Fargo Adventures #6



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe Eye of Heaven is the outstanding new Fargo Adventure from Top Ten bestseller Clive Cussler. Baffin Island, North-Western Canada: Husband-and-wife team Sami and Remi Fargo are on an environmental expedition to the Arctic, when to their astonishment they discover a Viking ship in the ice, perfectly preserved-and filled with pre-Columbian artefacts from Mexico. It's a combination history suggests shouldn't be possible. As the couple plunge into their research, tantalizing clues about a link between the Vikings and the legendary Toltec feathered serpent god Quetzalcoatl-and a fabled object known as the Eye of Heaven-begin to emerge. But so do many dangerous people . . . Soon the Fargos find themselves on the run through jungles, temples, and secret tombs, caught between treasure hunters, crime cartels, and those

with a far more personal motivation for stopping them. At the end of the road will be the solution to a thousand-year-old mystery-or death. Filled with the trademark breakneck pace and bold plotting that he has made his own, *The Eye of Heaven* proves once again that Clive Cussler is the Grandmaster of Adventure. This brand new instalment in the popular FARGO Adventures series follows the bestselling titles *Spartan Gold*, *Lost Empire*, *The Kingdom*, *The Tombs* and *The Mayan Secrets*. Praise for Clive Cussler: 'Clive Cussler is hard to beat' Daily Mail 'The guy I read' Tom Clancy 'The adventure king' Daily Express

Extrait PROLOGUE SOMEWHERE IN THE LABRADOR SEA, A.D. 1085

Flashes of lightning seared the turbid night sky, illuminating the drawn faces of the men heaving on the long wooden oars of the Viking longship as it fought against the ravages of the unforgiving sea. The captain swayed in time with the relentless swell as he watched the wall of towering waves pounding the stern. Sheer cliffs of black water driven by the icy wind threatened to capsize the hardy craft with each passing minute. Sheets of rain lashed the grim crewmen as they strained at their task, their survival depending on their unflagging effort. The captain eyed them with determination, his brow furrowed as the deluge tore at his skin, water running along the faint white battle scar stretching from the corner of his left eye to his blond beard. He'd grown up on the ocean, one of a hardened race of adventurers and plunderers, and nature's untamed violence was nothing new. Countless nights he'd hurled oaths on the treacherous North Sea, but, even for him, this was a once-in-a-lifetime storm. The wooden vessel was now badly off course, driven north as it ran with the seas. Had it pressed on its intended route, one of the mammoth waves would have assuredly broken over the bow and capsized the ship, bringing certain death. The best the captain could do was to steer the boat with the wind at his stern and ride out the fury of the gale. A flare of brilliance streaked through the roiling clouds, glowing momentarily before fading back into the gloom. Salt water dripped from his bearskin cloak as the muscles on his powerful arms bulged from the effort. Another bright flash lit the night. The glowering profile of a carved wooden dragon reflected the light just aft of the captain's head, soaked with the spray blowing off the angry sea. From among the exhausted oarsmen, a tall man with skin the texture of leather and an untamed red mane lurched his way forward, his footing sure on the coarse oak planks beneath him even in these miserable conditions. Thor is venting his fury tonight, eh, Vidar? the captain shouted to his mate over the howling wind. He is indeed, sir. But I think the worst is past. The swells seem smaller than a few hours ago. I hope you're right. My arms ache like I've been wrestling a bear all night. I know the feeling. You've seen my wife. The two veteran seamen exchanged humorless smiles, and then the mate edged next to the captain and took the rudder staff from his grip. So much for trying to sleep in this nightmare. How are the men holding up? the captain asked. As well as can be expected. Cold. Tired. Vidar didn't say afraid. It wasn't in these warriors to admit fear. They've spent enough time quaffing ale and enjoying the native hospitality. This will give them something to think about in case they've softened like a maiden's robe. Aye, Captain. It's definitely putting them to the test. A deafening explosion shook the deck beneath them. Both men gazed at the dazzling pyrotechnics with eyes seasoned from a lifetime on the ocean and in battle. The captain glimpsed a shape rising behind him and turned instinctively. They stared as the stern split a massive wave, the rush of the breaking sea the only sound. After a brief moment suspended at the crest, they gradually eased down the back side, the black monster disappearing into the darkness. Could you imagine if we'd hit that one square on? Vidar asked in a hushed voice. Or amidships. We'd all be on the way to Valhalla by now. Their eyes drifted to the mast, now shattered and useless, the top half torn away like a twig, along with a major portion of the sail, victim of the stealth with which the storm had hit. That had been a costly miscalculation. He should have lowered the woven wool sheet before the wind could rip it loose. But he'd been trying for every bit of speed possible. His men's arms were strong, but after almost twenty-four hours of rowing, even in shifts, they were reaching their limit. Among the most impressive longships ever launched, *Sigrun* was built to exacting standards for a crew of ninety, with rowing positions for up to eighty men, two to each of the ship's forty oars, and a detachable mast fifty feet in height. She boasted a length of a hundred twelve feet and a beam of sixteen, a keel hewn from one massive oak, and square stones for ballast. *Sigrun* could travel at a speed approaching fourteen knots under sail in calm conditions, but during a winter storm of this proportion, in the farthest reaches of the North Atlantic, speed wasn't an issue. Staying afloat was. The *Sigrun* had a typical Viking lapstrake, double-ender hull, but with a taller gunwale for open-sea expeditions, and its stern and bow were sculpted with identical dragon heads. Ships like *Sigrun* had a solid track record, navigating some of the most dangerous ocean on the planet, and their seaworthiness and speed were legendary. But even the most durable craft had its limits, and the storm had pushed *Sigrun* and her crew far beyond anything they'd been through in all their years together. Long hours passed, and as dawn's first glimmer fought through the

heavy gray clouds the seas began to flatten. The captain called out the order for the exhausted oarsmen to rest now that the most dangerous part had passed and then his eyes spotted a new menace: ice. Fifty yards ahead, an iceberg loomed in the haze, easily the size of a small hill. He twisted to the crewman manning the rudder and yelled a warning. Ice! Ahead! The ship had a shallow draft, but, even so, the churning waves could push them too near the submerged mass, which would shatter the wooden hull and sink the longship, the icy water killing all hands within minutes. The bow swung slowly, the steering sluggish as it resisted the surge of the following seas. Another rolling swell pushed them nearer too close for the captain's liking. Put your backs into it. Pull, damn you, pull or were done for. The ship glided past the brooding ice as silently as a wraith. The captain's eyes roved over the frozen monolith, an island of desolation in the middle of the ocean. He offered yet another silent prayer to the gods. If the ship was in the ice, the storm must have blown them farther north than he feared, and the overcast would make it impossible to plot a course using the primitive means at his disposal. Bring one of the ravens from the hold, he ordered. Vidar relayed the command to the nearest crewman, who scuttled away. The storm surge was nearly spent, and it was time to use one of the Viking seafarers' secret weapons: birds. Two men heaved a deck hatch open and descended into the forward cargo hold. Moments later, they emerged carrying a rough wooden cage with a large, agitated black form in it. The taller of the two men carried the cage to the captain's station at the stern and set it down on the deck. With a final glare at the sea, the captain squatted on his haunches and eyed the raven. Well, my friend, it's time. May you fly straight and true. Don't let me down. Our survival depends on your instincts. Let Odin guide you. He straightened and gave the crewman a curt nod. Release it, and wish it Godspeed. The crewman lifted the cage to chest height as Vidar approached and, after fiddling with the leather binding that held the access door closed, pulled the door open and reached in. The raven flinched, but the fight was out of it, and Vidar easily cornered it with cold hands. He withdrew the bird, and then, with a prayer of his own, tossed it into the air. The raven circled the ship, finding its wings, and then flew to port. Be quick about it. Bring the bow around. Follow the raven. Their gazes trailed the black speck as it disappeared into the distance, and they quickly aligned the prow's fearsome dragon head to the bird's flight. How many more do we have, Vidar? the captain asked. Only one. We lost the other two from shock. I know how they must have felt. That storm was one we'll be talking about around the fire when we're old and gray. That's the truth. But we made it. And now we know where landfall lies. The only question is how far away. Yes. And how hospitable. Probably not warm beaches and willing maidens, I'd wager, judging by the ice and the dropping temperature. I suspect you're right. The men fell silent, lost in their thoughts, their course uncertain for now. Once they found land and the clouds had parted, they could use the sun to plot the way home. Order the rest of the men to the oars, Vidar. We need to make speedy time while it's light. I don't want to spend another night on the open sea with icebergs waiting to sink us. Vidar turned to the resting men, who were slumbering wherever they could find space on the deck. Time to earn your keep. To the oars, Vikings, to the oars! By late afternoon, they could make out snow-covered mountains in the distance, perhaps a half a day ahead at their present speed. The welcome sight galvanized the exhausted men, who redoubled their efforts now that a destination was within reach. Vidar manned the rudder, and the captain looked landward from the helm, keeping a sharp eye on the water. As the ship drew nearer to land, the sea was filled with smaller chunks of floating ice, as well as the occasional massive iceberg. What do you think? the captain asked, his face pallid from two days of relentless stress. Its land, sure enough. I say we find safe harbor and put up for the night and then devise a plan once we're rested. The men are surely at the end of their rope. We can improvise some repair for the mast. It will be a long trip home if we have to row all the way. Vidar nodded. That it will be. Look a fjord. If we follow it inland, we should be able to find a suitable spot to make camp, the captain said, pointing a gnarled finger at the gap along the coastline. With any luck, there may even be an open river. Could be, Vidar agreed, squinting to better make it out. If there is, that would mean fresh water. And possibly animals. Both welcome guests to our diminishing stores. We should follow the fjord and see how far it goes, the captain said. I don't see any better options, and it will be dark again soon. Anything that gets us out of this wind. At least the cliffs will provide us shelter from the worst of it. Make for the fjord. Vidar fixed the oarsmen with a determined glare. Come on, lads. Pull. We're almost there. The only sound was the oars creaking as the men strained at their task. There was no other sign of life, no evidence that they weren't the only living things on Earth. There was nothing to indicate that they hadn't been blown to a freezing purgatory in some remote netherworld. Steady, men. Steady... Vidar called out as they weaved around the ice floes toward the blue-white cliffs on either side of the fjord. He leaned toward the captain. Can you make that out in the distance? It looks like a narrow channel. Yes, I see it. It's likely there's another bay beyond it. Whatever the case, we

need to keep moving forward until we find a place to put in for the night. Its likely theres no place to land along this unforgiving coast. The ship eased through the gap in the shore and found itself in an increasingly dense ice floe. The craggy canyon walls jutted high into the heavens and blocked out the dimming rays of the setting sun. As they continued forward, the area grew darker, but thankfully the worst of the weather had been left at the channels mouth and the water was still. The captain pointed to a spot ahead. There. By the base of the glacier. It might be tight, but it looks like we can get the ship at least partially beached, safe for the night. We can then take a party and see what awaits us on land at dawn tomorrow. Vidar squinted at the sliver of flat ice and nodded. He leaned his weight against the rudder and turned the crafts bow to the sloping indentation. The slim remaining light wavered across the surface of the ice-strewn inlet, and the men expended their last resources driving the longship the final distance. The curved bow scraped onto the frozen crust with a jolt, and the crew leapt out to heave the vessel farther ashore so it wouldnt float away with a rising tide, using their battle-axes to secure grips in the ice. They were able to get half of the mammoth craft out of the water a testament to the design and lightweight construction of Viking vessels. The captain gave the signal to cease; theyd done their best, and, with the final glow of the rapidly dwindling dusk, would do better to conserve their strength and make camp on deck for the night. The captain gazed skyward at the tapestry of stars and offered a silent plea to the gods that they aid him in guiding his men to safety. Tomorrow they would mount an expedition armed with their longbows and, with any luck, bag venison for food while they repaired the shattered mast. While it was not impossible to use the oars to carry them east to their homeland, even a partial working sail would increase the odds of delivering their priceless cargo. His final thought before drifting off was that no matter what, he had to make it back. Hed sworn a sacred oath to the expeditions leader, who had died in a land so far from home. The new dawn revealed an ominous gray backdrop of sky. Vidar shifted, his cloak crackling as a thin veneer of ice shattered along its surface. He forced his eyes open to find the entire ship dusted in whitesnowfall from a midnight flurry that had entirely blanketed the craft. The captain stirred several feet away from him and then rose. His eyes roved over the slumbering crew before settling on what had been water and was now frozen solid. An ominous horizon of storm clouds brooded over the ocean. He watched as the dark line approached, and moved to where Vidar was struggling to sit up, his limbs stiff from the cold. I fear another storm is approaching. Have the men unfurl whats left of the sail, the captain ordered, and well use it for shelter. Judging by the look of those clouds, were not out of it yet. Vidar nodded as he squinted at the heavens. We dont have long before the storm returns. The captain turned to his crew. Men! Up with you. Get the sail free and spread it over the deck for cover. And be quick about it. Unless you want to be up to your necks in sleet! The groggy crew pushed themselves into action, and by the time the freezing deluge fell theyd crafted a makeshift tent and were huddled beneath it. The first wave of hail hit with the force of a blow against the fabric, and to a man they were grateful for the captains quick thinking as the weather tore at the vessel with the fury of a demon. On and on the storm raged until midday. Eventually the hammering ceased, and the only sound was the heavy breathing of the men, their exhalations warming the enclosure as the blizzard abated. When the captain pushed the edge of the sail aside and moved into the now-still air, the landscape was blinding white as far as he could see, the ship now buried up to the top of the gunwales. He considered their alternatives, which were bleaker by the moment. They were trapped, the ship immobilized, and there was little to encourage him on their chances of survival. Vidars head poked out beside him, and then, slowly, the crew moved the sail aside, the men pausing as a group to take in the vast expanse of the Arctic wasteland. The captain scanned the surroundings and then squared his shoulders. All right. The worst is behind us. Form an exploratory party, and lets take the measure of this place while we have a break in the weather. Report back before dark. I want to know what were facing. Vidar turned toward the men, his face stoic, his jaw set with resolve. Thirty of the best archers among you. Gather your bows and swords, and take sufficient provisions for the day. We depart as soon as ready. The crewmen scrambled, energized at the chance to finally get off the ship, and there was much good-natured argument over who was the better bowman and thus more deserving of the duty. After a brief outfitting, the Vikings tromped through the fresh snow, a slow line of shaggy forms moving toward the glacier, searching for a route to ascend from the waters edge. Finally Vidar cried out and pointed to a narrow gap in the ice where a jagged outcropping of rock jutted from the steep face. The column diverted to the promising area before disappearing, one by one, from view. Dusk had darkened the sky when the captain saw Vidars familiar red beard approaching across the ice, returning from the gap, trailed by the plodding archers. When Vidar arrived, he gave the captain a curt nod, and the two men moved to the stern of the ship, where they could converse privately. We went for hours. Its nothing but ice. Didnt see even a bird. It cant be endless.

What about the surroundings? There are mountains in the distance on either side. I think our only chance is to try to reach them tomorrow. Where there's land, there will be life, and, if we're lucky, we can hunt something down and return with it. The captain considered his mate's words. Very well. At first light, form two parties.

Forty men in each. You take one, I the other. Split up and we'll make our way off the ice in opposite directions. That will improve the odds of at least one of us finding food. We'll leave the rest of the men with the ship. The following morning, the men set off at dawn, a long file of brave warriors with no enemy to vanquish but cold and hunger. Once they were on the glacier's surface, the captain clasped a strong hand on Vidar's shoulder and embraced him. Good luck to you. May your game bag be brimming by day's end, he said. And to you as well. When we've hunted all we can carry, we'll return to the ship. The captain nodded, looking deep into Vidar's eyes. Both men knew that their future was uncertain, with no guarantee of anything ahead but misery and starvation. But they were Vikings and they would forge ahead until there were none left standing. The captain took a bearing on a far peak and pointed, his voice measured and strong. Onward, men! There are streams of clear water and fat elk eager to make your acquaintance. Let's not force them to wait. And with that, he took the first long steps toward the distant mountains, moving with the grace of a predatory cat, leading as he always had, with the confidence of one born to the task.

CARTAGENA, SPAIN, PRESENT DAY

The Bermudez rocked lazily in the mild swells of the azure sea, tugging at her anchor chain like an overexcited dog on a short leash. The ninety-six-foot steel-hulled expedition boat was more stable than most vessels her size, and she gave the appearance of a commercial fishing trawler rather than a marine archaeology ship. A small red-and-white dive flag bobbed thirty-five yards off her stern. Bubbles frothed to the surface near the oversized aft dive platform as Remi Fargo emerged from the deep. Water coursed from her black wet suit as she hauled herself up the partially submerged ladder. She pushed her dive mask up on top of her head and reveled in the warmth of the summer sun on her face. Dropping back into the water, she slipped out of her buoyancy control system vest. Sam Fargo padded across the deck and down the steps to her position, pausing for a moment to appreciate her beauty before offering a grin and reaching out to help with her fins and gear. And who might this vision of loveliness from the sea be? A mermaid, perhaps? A siren? he asked playfully. She eyed him with skepticism and swatted his bare chest. Are you getting fresh with me? He shrugged. I figured flattery was never a bad option. You'll go far, young man. You have a bright future. Sam lifted the BC harness with a strong, slightly sunburned arm, the rigid lines of muscle barely strained by the forty-pound rig. You find anything more? Nope. I think we've cataloged everything. More bubbles disturbed the surface, and then another head popped out of the water. I see Dominic's arrived. The second diver pulled himself onto the platform and shed his tank and gear. Closely cropped black hair slightly fringed with gray topped his lean, swarthy face. He smiled at them and gave a thumbs-up. I think we're done, no? he asked, more a statement than a question. As captain of the ship and the leader of the Spanish team of divers chartered by the University of Seville to explore the shipwreck a hundred thirty-five feet below, it was

Dominic's call. He deferred out of courtesy to his two American colleagues, who were renowned treasure hunters. They had originally discovered the wreck and reported it to the Spanish Department of Maritime History. Sam and Remi's research had concluded that it was probably a seventeenth-century merchant ship that had sunk in a winter storm. It was lying buried in the silt on a ledge, beyond which the seafloor dropped off sharply. The shipwreck had turned out to be the type of vessel in question, and a group of divers and marine archaeologists had been dispatched, with the Fargos assisting in exploring the ship to determine its historical significance. Sure looks like we're finished, Remi agreed as she ran her fingers through her hair, faint bronze highlights shimmering as it began to dry. She unzipped the front of the wet suit and her hand unconsciously moved to the tiny gold scarab suspended from a leather thong around her neck. It was a new good-luck charm Dominic had presented to her in an elaborate display when they'd arrived. And good luck it

had indeed brought in spite of the depth, the dive had been a relatively easy one: a week in an idyllic location, doing what they loved. The captain was charming and the crew courteous and efficient. If only all of their adventures were so low-key, she thought, and turned to Sam. Where can a girl freshen up around here? Your cabin awaits. The champagne is on ice, the chocolates on the pillow, Sam said with a small bow. Knowing you, you drank the champagne and wolfed down the candy, she teased. I'm an open book to you, aren't I? What was the giveaway? The brown smear on your chin. The low rumble of powerful diesel engines reached them from across the water, and they turned to watch a large white private yacht cut its power as it neared to within two hundred yards. Remi peered at the transom, but the name and home port were blocked by a long row of dive tanks in a custom-made rack. Any closer and we'd be buying each other jewelry, Sam said as they continued to observe the vessel. Big, isn't it? Remi remarked. Probably a hundred

fifty feet at least. Lot of tanks. Looks like they're serious about their diving. A crew member moved to the bow of the opulent craft and, moments later, the anchor dropped, its long chain rattling as it lowered into the sea. Two and a half miles away, the rugged coastline jutted into the summer sky; nearer was the Isla de Las Palomas, with its fleet of pleasure boaters and small yachts out for day trips from the nearby marinas. A polar-white cruise ship inched into the Cartagena harbor, a popular port for many Mediterranean cruises. Doesn't it strike you as strange, Dominic, that a boat would anchor this close to the shipwreck? Sam asked. Not necessarily, Dominic said. A lot of boats here like to overnight within sight of others, in case they need assistance of some kind. Still, were a long way from the beaten path, don't you think? Remi said. Maybe they're just as curious about what we're doing here, Sam reasoned. After all, we've been anchored for a week, and the dive flags very visible. That's probably it. Human nature, Dominic said, apparently unconcerned. Remi held her hand up, shielding her eyes as she watched the ship play out more anchor chain. I just hope they don't discover the shipwreck and disturb any artifacts before the government authorities get here. I wouldn't be too worried about it, Dominic assured her. Most divers know better than to go inside a shipwreck that's mostly buried like this one. Nobody wants to get trapped. A death sentence. You're probably right. Remi tilted her face up to the late-morning sun and closed her eyes, then opened them and looked at Sam. Were you in the process of wooing me with chocolates and champagne? It was more of a veiled threat. You should know I don't scare easily, veils or otherwise. They made their way to their stateroom after putting away their gear. Their quarters were large by marine standards, paneled in dark hardwood, the mahogany dulled by the years but still retaining a warm richness. Sam took a seat at the small built-in table near one of the cabins two portholes as Remi entered the bathroom, and soon the shower was steaming forth a luxuriant stream. You buy that the boats harmless? Remi called from the stall. No reason to believe it isn't. There's a lot of very valuable statuary in that shipwreck, Remi reminded him. The merchant vessel had gone down with all hands, and had been rumored to be smuggling priceless antiquities from Greece to Britain, where there had been a large market for them among the royals and the upper class. Their careful inventory of the wreck had confirmed the centuries-old suspicion, and there were untold millions of dollars worth of never-before-seen Greek relics in its hold—a different kind of treasure, to be sure, than the usual gold and jewels, but treasure nonetheless. The hope had been to keep the remarkable discovery quiet until the government could arrange to retrieve the statuary from the sea, and it was always a concern that mercenary treasure hunters could intrude, damaging the site as they attempted to pilfer it, although the likelihood was low. There is indeed, Sam conceded. I'm sure the people of Spain wouldn't want anyone to try to make off with their property. Sam and Remi had agreed that anything they discovered would be turned over to the government—a policy of theirs that had made them welcome additions to many of the most interesting expeditions around the world. They were in the game for the thrill of discovery, not for the money, Sam's fortune having been long solidified by the sale of his company to a conglomerate years before. Dominic didn't seem too concerned. And he knows these waters well. The shower shut off and the door swung open. Remi emerged and wrapped herself in a thick towel and dried her hair with another in front of the bathroom vanity as Sam tapped at the laptop computer in front of him. True. I think we should keep an eye on that boat. Aye, aye, Skipper. Sam's gaze drifted from the computer screen to the bathroom doorway, where he could make out half of Remi as she brushed the tangles from her auburn mane. Have I mentioned that you look fabulous? Not nearly enough. Now, where are the champagne and chocolates? I might have exaggerated to lure you belowdecks. It worked. I hope you have a suitable alternative in mind. Sam powered down the laptop and closed the screen. I have a few ideas... When Sam and Remi returned to the main deck, they glanced up at the second level, where the crew sat around a card table dotted with beer bottles, laughing and tossing money into the pot as they studied their hands, smoke curling skyward from hand-rolled cigarettes. The expedition was over and now it was time to relax, a pursuit at which the Spanish excelled. Remi watched with amusement as one of the men accused the head of the dive team of cheating. The target's predictable response to the gibe was one of outrage and offended pride, which was suitably soothed with a round of toasts celebrating his integrity. She turned to Sam, but he'd moved to the stern, where he was staring at the horizon. A light breeze from the south tousled his hair and his white linen shirt. Remi joined him, and together they watched as four divers from the visiting yacht donned their wet suits and equipment and then dropped into the water. Are you thinking what I'm thinking? That maybe we've been compromised? Remi asked. Actually, I was more leaning toward it being a nice afternoon for a relaxing dive. I can't go very deep. Still need a lot more surface time. I don't think you'll need to. I just want to have a look around and make sure that our suspicions aren't correct. Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't out to get you. Exactly. So what do you think? That it's time to go back and

put on our bathing suits? You're going to owe me some serious spa sessions for this after doing the last dive. You know I'd have gone with you if I could have. The decompression tables don't lie. Which means you have limited dive time, too, Mr. Cousteau, she warned, concern fluttering across her face. Yes, ma'am.

Whatever you say, ma'am. Now, that's a little more like it. Five minutes later, they were ready, the crew still absorbed in its revelry, unaware of Sam and Remi's approach to the dive platform. Visibility still about sixty feet? Sam asked as he put his mask in place. About that. Maybe a little better. Then we shouldn't need a lot of bottom time. Just a fun, recreational dive. Near the wreck, of course. Seems like the natural place, doesn't it? What about being spotted? We'll dive on a trajectory that'll place the Bermudez's hull above us as much as possible, Sam explained. Besides, if I'm right, they won't be looking up. You know how it is when you're wreck-diving. Tunnel vision. Remi nodded in agreement. Good plan. They eased the heavy stainless steel ladder from the platform into the water and, instead of dropping into the sea, carefully lowered themselves until they were fully immersed. Sam gave Remi the okay and she reciprocated, signaling that she was ready. They gradually descended to sixty feet, moving as they had discussed on a rough course for the wreck. At forty yards away, Sam signaled to Remi to stay put and then swam away, farther into the darkening depths. Ten minutes went by, and just as she was beginning to worry, Sam reappeared, checking his dive timer. He pointed toward the surface. When they made it to the surface, he spat his regulator out, the big white yacht only fifty feet away. Busted. Two of the divers were inside the hull, and the other two were outside. I could see their work lights, he reported. And then five more came out of the wreck. Hauling statuary. So the four we saw were only a small part of the gang. Could be ten or more inside. How? How could they have known? Obviously, they came prepared... Which raises the questions, who are they and who leaked the info? Anyone who knows about the wreck could have given them the coordinates. That's a pretty long list of Spanish officials. I suppose so. And as to who these pirates are...? Remi asked. There's only one way to find out. She shook her head. You're not thinking. The best defense is a good offense. Wouldn't it be better to notify the authorities? You mean the same ones that might have tipped these guys off? What do you want to bet that goes nowhere? Remi sighed. I suppose this has been way too calm for your tastes so far. I should have known better. Come on. Let's go take a look at how the other half lives. We are the other half. You know what I mean. Yes, Sam. I'm all too afraid I do. They approached the interlopers' yacht at fifteen feet of depth, and Sam punched in a waypoint on his dive GPS when they were directly below it. With another glance back at the shipwreck's position, he pointed up at the stern, and Remi signaled that she was ready. Together, they ascended to the dive ladder that hung below the swim step and Sam hauled himself up, followed closely by Remi. Let's leave our gear here. We'll look just like any of the other divers. If we're spotted, just wave. I don't know, Sam. I might be a little curvier than the average technical diver. Which is only one of the many reasons I love you. At least I can cross off the worry about you running away with another diver. Running sounds exhausting, especially in flippers. Remi swatted him. After a furtive scan of the empty lower-deck area near the transom, they mounted the stairs to it. The yacht had four stories above the hull. A soft swirling of jazz music drifted down from the second-story deck. Sounds like the party's up there, Remi whispered. Sam nodded. Question is whether we want to join in. Prudence would dictate caution. So we crash it? She gave him a knowing look. If I said no, would that stop you? Good point. Let's sneak up and see who we're dealing with. Sneak? Wearing a wet suit? On a mega-yacht? I didn't say the plan couldn't use some fine-tuning, Sam admitted. She smirked. Lead on, O great hunter. He hoisted himself onto the second-level deck and found himself facing three extremely tanned young beauties wearing little more than smiles, lying on chaise longues around a hot tub. One of them glanced up and fixed Sam with a frank gaze, then lowered her sunglasses slowly to get a better look. Four considerably older men sat gathered around a large teak table filled with epicurean fare and champagne, their cigar smoke pungent on the balmy breeze. A fifth, and younger, man stood at the portside railing, watching the Bermudez with binoculars. Sam regarded the seated group, and one of the men rose an imposing figure, wearing a brightly colored Robert Graham shirt, ivory Armani silk-and-linen pants, and Prada loafers. Sam smiled and locked eyes with him. The man's face registered shock for a few seconds, but quickly settled into a practiced grin, as genteel as the cream Panama hat cocked rakishly on his head. Sam and Remi Fargo. What a pleasant surprise. How good of you to drop in, he said, his upper-crust British accent unmistakable. Sam sensed Remi behind him. Without turning to her, he approached the table with an equally friendly smile on his face and reached out to lift one of the champagne bottles from the sweating silver buckets. He studied the label for a second and then dropped the bottle back into the ice. Well, if it isn't Janus Benedict. Still drinking Billecart-Salmon 1996, I see, Sam said. I see no reason to change horses, having already backed a winner. If I might ask, to what do we owe the

pleasure of your company? We were over on that other ship, saw yours, and were wondering if you had any Grey Poupon. Ah, the infamous Fargo humor asserts itself. Well met, Janus replied, his tone steeped in an elegant civility that perfectly complemented his graying pencil-thin mustache. The other three seated men eyed the Fargos with guarded amusement, enjoying the interlude it was obvious to everyone at the table that Janus and the Fargos were old adversaries. The younger man approached Janus and murmured in his ear, Janus. What are you doing? Throw them off... now. Or better yet Janus silenced him with a curt gesture. He moved him away and spoke into his ear. Reginald, stop, he hissed. Stop right now. One should always keep ones enemies close, the better to understand their mind. Its insanity. Reginald reached toward the rear of his waist, where a pistol was concealed by his loose shirt. Reginald, you may be my brother, but you escalate this on my boat and there'll be hell to pay. Think. Just for a second. Bring a weapon into the equation and were out of options. So stop it, now, and go back to studying your navel while the adults play. Janus pulled away and returned his attention to the new arrivals. Please. I insist. Some champagne. And, Remi, may I say that you look as ravishing as ever... Remi had removed her dive hood and unzipped her wet suit. Ever the silver-tongued devil, aren't you, Janus? I'd have to be made of stone to be oblivious to your beauty, dear lady, Janus said, then took his seat and snapped his fingers. A steward in white slacks and a matching short-sleeved shirt with black epaulets materialized from inside the upstairs salon. Bring two more chairs for my guests, as well as some proper glasses. And be quick about it, Janus ordered. Yes, sir. Like rabbits from a hat, two more stewards appeared bearing chairs and champagne flutes. Remi and Sam took seats at the table. The shorter of the servants poured them both glasses of champagne, which sparkled like effervescent gold in the bright sun. Janus indicated his entourage with an open palm. Allow me to introduce everyone. Pasqual, Andrew, Sergei, meet Sam and Remi Fargos. Some would argue the most successful treasure hunters on the planet. Oh, and the gentleman over there, admiring your fine vessel, is my younger brother, Reginald. The men nodded at the Fargos. Sam shook his head. Hardly treasure hunters, Janus. Were merely possessed with insatiable curiosity and find ourselves in the right place at auspicious times. Yes, quite. You certainly have Lady Luck perched firmly on your shoulders. But fortune favors the bold, it's said. Janus raised his glass in a toast. To fair weather and smooth sailing. Remi raised her glass to meet his, and Sam just smiled. What brings you to the Spanish coast, Janus? Not really your stomping ground, is it? Sam asked. All work and no play, dear boy. Janus eyes skimmed over the three reclining nubile by the tub. Doctors orders. Take in the salt air, enjoy the sun. None of us can be sure how much more time we have. He paused. And you? We must have the same doctor. He gave us almost identical instructions, Remi interjected. Yes, well. Great minds and all. Sam leaned forward. I couldn't help but notice that you have quite a dive shop on this boat. Janus didn't blink and merely offered a wan smile. Some of my guests are real enthusiasts. One of the prices of entertaining. I had it outfitted so they'd have everything they could wish for. Judging by the empty tank holders, I presume we missed them. Did you? It's so hard to keep track of everyone on a yacht this size. But it doesn't surprise me to hear that they went for a dive. That's one of their passions, after all. Rather keen on it, actually. What is she? Forty meters? Remi asked. Oh my, no. Rather more like fifty-something. I forget exactly. It's only one in my stable, don't you know. A bit of a sod to maintain and not inexpensive, but why do we strive if not to enjoy our little luxuries? They spent another twenty minutes bantering, circling gladiators in a verbal arena, probing each other for any hint of vulnerability, but Janus was too smooth to slip up. Even though Sam and Remi knew his game, and Janus knew that they knew, there wasn't much to be done about it aboard his yacht.

When Sam grew tired of the exchange, they excused themselves, thanked Janus for his hospitality, and returned to the dive platform. Leaves a taste like spoiled food, doesn't he? Sam commented as they donned their gear. Like rotten shark meat. Remi pulled on her hood. He's very smooth, though, isn't he? Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. He's always been that way. Remember the last time? Sam and Remi had run across Benedict once before, on an expedition to locate a lost Spanish galleon off the Normandy coast. A search that had ultimately proved successful, but not before they'd had to contend with suspicious equipment failures they'd believed had been engineered by Janus's henchmen. His name came up routinely in certain circles in connection with stolen artifacts, as well as his primary business: arms-dealing to a who's who of African despots and cartel-affiliated shell companies. His connections and financial clout were such that he'd never been prosecuted for so much as a parking ticket. His network of banks, insurance firms, and real estate development companies secured his position as a legitimate fixture on the United Kingdom's social scene. He'd been invited to more palaces than most career diplomats and swam in the treacherous waters of power with the natural ease of a barracuda. We have to notify the university and the government, Sam. We can't let him get away with this. You and I both know the wreck will be picked clean by the time he's done with it,

Remi whispered. Yes, I know. But my fear is that hes obviously been able to buy off at least some of the higher functionaries, so by the time they do arrive to secure the cache the Spanish people will be the poorer for it. Remi adjusted her dive vest and turned to face Sam. I know that tone. What are you thinking of doing? Well still go through the proper channels, but it may take a little unconventional thinking to guarantee he doesnt make off with anything first. And youre just the guy to think big... and outside the box, she said, raising one eyebrow. Id like to believe Im more than just a pretty face to you. Well, you do give a good back rub. Subtle hint there? Sam asked, peering over the edge of the platform at the water below. And you catch on quick. I like that. She splashed into the sea, and Sam waited until her head bobbed on the surface nearby before joining her, his mind churning over possible ways to thwart Janus on the open ocean, vastly outnumbered by his crew. Dominic paced in the pilothouse as Sam and Remi waited with crossed arms for a response from the Spanish Department of Antiquities on what course of action they intended to take in order to protect the shipwreck from looting. In frustration, Sam glanced at the Anonimo Professionale CNS dive watch Remi had given him for his birthday. Theyd insisted on radioing in the threat when nobody had answered their phones not completely unexpected on a Friday before a holiday weekend. Dominic cut short his walk to nowhere and turned to face them. My friends, weve done everything we can. Ill notify you when I hear something. Isnt there anyone else we can get in touch with? The police? The Coast Guard? Remi demanded. Ill notify everyone and anyone, but theres a limit to how many of these agencies will react. Remember that while this is extremely important to us, to the rest of the world its low on the priority list. Our best bet is to wait for someone from the university or the government to respond. By which time, they could have made off with most, or all, of the relics, Sam said. Dominic shrugged. I understand your frustration. I share it. Which is why Ill wait to hear and keep calling whoever I can think of. Sam touched Remis arm and they exchanged a look. Sam nodded and let out a sigh. I suppose we have to work within the system. If nobody cares to respond, we cant make them. And we certainly cant sink Benedicts boat, much as Id like to. Remi gave him a dark glare. Sam... I said I wouldnt. Dont worry. Sam looked at Dominic. You will come get us if theres any word? Of course. The moment I hear something. Sam led the way back on deck, where the crews barbeque celebration had gradually increased in volume as the day wore on. Raucous laughter greeted them, along with shouts of mock outrage as the never-ending card game continued. The surface of the water around the Bermudez rippled with golden flashes as the sun slid beneath the horizon. Twilight would soon overtake them, and both Sam and Remi knew that their chances of any action being taken by the authorities were receding with the suns waning glow. Back in their stateroom, Remi sat down on the bed and eyed Sam, who had moved to the nearest porthole, from which he was watching Januss yacht. You know nobodys going to respond until Monday at the earliest, she said. Thats unfortunately true. Whether its because Benedict paid them off to be unavailable or because its Friday in Spain. Sam paused. I think I know how theyre going to make off with the statuary without risking being boarded and arrested, even though its a long shot. Theyre not going to load anything on board. Then how are they going to steal it? Ah. With a little sleight of hand, and using Mother Nature to hide their tracks. Its a little late in the day for riddles, Sam. If I were them, Id wait until it got dark. How long do you think it would take to empty the hold? Just to extract the statues, if you didnt care about damaging the wreck? At least all day. But you might lose a few pieces, Remi said. Right. Their biggest problem will be raising it all from the bottom. They cant do that without being obvious. So my hunch is theyll wait until dark and use the ships cranes. Remi frowned. I thought you said they werent going to load it. Not into the boat. She stared at him, puzzlement written across her face, and then smiled. Youre a sneaky one, arent you? If you want to catch a thief, you have to think like one, Sam said. They could be done in six to seven hours if they move fast, which you have to believe they will. The work lights will more than compensate for the lack of daylight. I say theyll pull an all-nighter and be ready to steam out of here at dawn, if not before. Thats my prediction. But were going to throw a wrench in that, Remi said. You bet. I specialize in wrench tossing. It was my minor in college. I thought it was beer drinking. You have to have priorities. And they arent mutually exclusive. What time do you see the party beginning on our end? Id say around four in the morning. Better to be early than too late. Want to fill me in on how were going to stop them? I thought youd never ask. The moon grinned crookedly from between scattered clouds, its cool radiance shimmering across the wrinkled sea as Sam and Remi descended to the dive platform. The rest of the archaeology team had long since retired and were slumbering the untroubled sleep of the inebriated. Remi opened one of the watertight lockers and removed two bulky dive masks with night vision monoculars attached courtesy of Sams contacts in the Defense Department. Theyd used them to great effect inside the hull of the wreck, where the scope would amplify even the dimmest traces of light and

illuminate the entire area. I hope this works, Remi whispered as they checked each other's gear. It's our best shot. But, hey, what do I know? She patted the top of his head. You're good on the equipment. You, too. He stepped away. The night vision scopes are state-of-the-art. Worst case, we use one of the flashlights if we need a small light source. If we're careful and limit the beam to the hull, nobody will see it. She eyed the gentle swells. Did I ever tell you how romantic it is to dive into the cold sea in the dead of night? I was hoping you'd be a pushover for that. You know me like the beating of your own heart. They both froze as a creak reached them from the upper level. Sam cocked his head, listening for any hint of movement, and after a few minutes of continued silence they relaxed; it was probably just the wooden deck changing temperature. Sam took the mask from her and switched on the NV scope, then pulled the strap over his dive hood. Hey, whaddaya know? I can see! You ready to go swimming? he whispered. I was born ready, big boy. She donned her mask and activated the scope and, after a final check of her dive bag, lowered herself into the water. Sam joined her moments later, and soon they were swimming toward Benedict's yacht using Sam's GPS waypoint. Visibility wasn't as bad as he'd feared, ten feet below the surface, and enough moonlight penetrated to their depth for them to easily see each other. Sam estimated that with the scopes they had a good thirty feet of usable range before everything faded into darkness, which he hoped would be enough for their purposes. Remi glided through the water like a dolphin behind him, and when he looked back he felt a surge of pride in her for agreeing to tackle a difficult task with him, as she had so often, without flinching. The yacht's hull loomed ahead, and as they drew closer they could make out the expected nets suspended below it by nylon rope, secured to heavy steel eyelets that had been welded to the vessel's underside specifically for that purpose. Sam gestured at the nearest, filled with statues, and they passed in front of it to the bow. As they did, the water hummed with a droning vibration; the engines firing up. Remi looked at Sam. He indicated the closest net, withdrew his XS Scuba titanium dive knife from its leg sheath, and swam to where one of two lines connected to the hull. Remi did the same and moved to the opposite line, taking a moment to peer at the full nets hanging like pendulous fruit from the ship. Easily a dozen or more disappeared into the darkness along the yacht's length. Sam began sawing at the nylon line. Remi matched his efforts until her side frayed and then snapped, followed almost instantly by Sam's. They watched as the net filled with artifacts sank slowly back to the bottom. When it was out of sight, they swam to the next in the queue. Ten minutes later, as they were approaching the second-to-last net, the yacht began moving. Sam looked around and pointed at the anchor chain, which was slackening as the vessel eased forward. Remi shot to the side to avoid becoming entangled in the netting as it moved toward her. Sam did the same. The chain tightened as it pulled free from the bottom, and then the vessel paused directly over the anchor as it rose from the deep. Remi motioned at the two remaining nets. They swam to the two lines and began cutting, aware that they didn't have much time before the ship got under way. If they were lucky, they'd be able to free both and get clear by the time the yacht powered forward again. Sam attacked his line with renewed vigor. The anchor chain clattered as it rolled onto the windlass at the bow, the sound, even underwater, like the firing of a machine gun. The cutting became more difficult as the stern drifted, pushed by the wind above, the giant five-bladed props turning slowly as the transmissions rested at idle. Sam's side finally came free, and one side of the nylon net dropped in slow motion; and then, just as Remi was through her side, the huge props began spinning and the yacht lurched forward. Sam cursed silently as he felt the pull of the props dragging him toward them. After a final glance at the remaining net containing a single statue, he kicked with all his might to escape. He'd seen too many photographs of accidents involving propellers to risk a last attempt and he turned his head, searching for Remi, as he dived straight down. He almost made it. The last net snagged Sam's tank and for a horrifying moment he was dragged along, all control lost. Facing backward, he found himself staring at a vision crafted from his worst nightmare: the churning of the gleaming, sharp brass propellers only a few yards from where he was trapped. The surge as the ship gathered momentum pulled him closer and he struggled uselessly to free himself, aware that he had only seconds before the anchor was up and the captain increased speed to where even if Sam got loose, he'd be sucked into the deadly blades. He reached behind him with his dive knife and slashed blindly at the thick nylon net. To no avail. In a last desperate bid for survival, he groped for his harness releases and snapped them open as he took a deep breath of compressed air and then pulled his regulator free of his mouth and swam into the deep with all his might. His left flipper jolted as a prop blade tore through it, and then he was being pushed through the water as though in a jet stream, hurled backward by the prop wash as the yacht accelerated. After a seeming eternity of being batted around in the wake, Sam broke the surface and gasped in fresh, sweet air, the stern of Benedict's vessel bright in his night vision monocular. He inhaled another huge lungful and then

went back under to look for Remi. She'd gotten clear sooner than he, and Sam could make out her form gliding into the dark. Safe. He dived down to her and took her hand. Remi gave it a squeeze. She turned to him and her eyes widened behind her mask as she saw him without his tank, only the snorkel in his mouth. He gave a thumbs-up, and they both rose to the surface. What happened to your rig? she asked as they floated in the dark. The sea gods demanded a sacrifice and it was either the tank or me. Are you all right? Never better. Let's get back to the boat before dawn breaks, he said, looking over to where the Bermudez floated peacefully on the ebony swells. Back on board, Remi removed her gear, and they both stripped off their dive suits. Their intention was to say nothing about their nocturnal adventure until the shipwreck was under guard. Given Benedict's obvious reach into unknown levels of the Spanish administration, that seemed the most prudent course. No point in tipping him off and eliminating any timing advantage they'd bought themselves. Sam got a better look at his battered fin, sliced laterally. The prop blade had missed his foot by inches, an unnecessary reminder of how close he'd come. Thankfully, Remi didn't register it in the dark, and he decided not to share his brush with disaster. The statue he got away with looked like the full-height one of Athena, Remi whispered. We'll notify the authorities, if and when they arrive. I don't trust anyone on this boat. Remi's eyes widened. You don't think one of the team...? I don't know what to think. I just know that Benedict's dirty money seems to have bought a lot of indifference to obvious robbery, and I don't want to take any chances. She nodded. Think we could get another few hours of shut-eye? That's my hope. We'll heat up the phones and the radio tomorrow. For now, I'd say mission accomplished, even if he did get away with one relic. Once it's reported, he'll be hard-pressed to smuggle it anywhere or sell it. Hopefully, that's true, but, as you know, some collectors are pretty unscrupulous. *Revue de presse* A fun blend of history and mystery... A typically energetic Cussler actioner. *Booklist* Readers can expect the usual Fargo fun. *Publishers Weekly*